

The Influence of a Celebrity Chef: A Rhetorical Analysis of the “Emeril Live,” A Television Cooking Show

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1. Introduction

Within the last five to 10 years, food and all things culinary have become obsessions in the national mass media. American food culture has, in turn, become popular culture as well. The launch of television’s Food Network (Food) in 1993 may be a catalyst for the burgeoning popularity of food culture via the ascension of the celebrity chef. Today, celebrity chefs are no longer merely cookbook authors and executive chefs in America’s best restaurants—they are becoming brands in themselves. To examine and understand this cultural phenomenon, one must study the success of 45-year-old Emeril Lagasse, Food Network’s main star chef and “arguably the best-known chef-restaurateur in America,” as well as the success of Food’s cornerstone show, “Emeril Live” [1].

In 1997, Lagasse was tapped to host “Emeril Live,” a personality-driven program that “features a live audience and a band and showcases not only Lagasse’s cooking skill, but his utter passion for food and his utter hamness” [2]. Today, Lagasse has amassed an empire—the largest among celebrity chefs—with more than 150 products including cookware, utensils, cutlery, kitchen clothing and signature spices [3]. His 14 cookbooks had sold 3.5 million copies by mid-2003, and his nine restaurants in cities like New Orleans, Las Vegas, and Miami had revenues of approximately \$95 million in 2003 [4]. He shows no signs of slowing down. In May 2003, Lagasse signed a five-year, multi-million dollar contract with Food for 90 new episodes per year of the top-rated “Emeril Live” show [5]. Lagasse “can make as much as \$25,000 an episode, amounting to \$1 million or more in a 30-episode cycle” [6]. His personal annual earnings were estimated at \$7 million in 2003 [7].

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion and Significance

The goal of this research was to examine persuasive messages in “Emeril Live” using the rhetorical criticism qualitative research method. Given the aforementioned success of the show and its host, this research is rhetorically significant because it contributes to the general body of knowledge on food culture in mass media already amassed in the popular culture genre. Specifically, this research addressed two questions. RQ1: What are the persuasive communication techniques and messages used by producers of the show in episodes of “Emeril Live?” RQ2: Are there recurring themes that may lend to the show’s appeal and popularity? The application of fantasy theme analysis offers a critical lens with which to address these research questions.

Rhetorical criticism “is the business of identifying the complications of rhetoric and explaining them in a comprehensive and efficient manner,” which, in some cases, “documents social trends” [8]. To examine how fans of “Emeril Live” come to share symbolic realities and, in turn, “become caught up in a group consciousness that provides shared meaning, emotion and motive for action,” the employment of Ernest Bormann’s fantasy theme analysis, the backbone of symbolic convergence theory, is illuminating [9].

The rhetorical artifacts analyzed were two, one-hour videotaped “Emeril Live” episodes. The sample shows—“Chill in the Air” on October 18, 2004, and “Cider Rules” on October 19, 2004—were randomly chosen in advance from Food’s online programming guide. General content was transcribed, noting interesting quotes and emerging themes derived from Lagasse’s comments, actions and movements. Recurring phrases like “Bam!” were counted while studio audience and live band responses also were referenced.

Four primary fantasy themes emerge from the shows when examining them as rhetorical artifacts.

Eroticism & Innuendo

There is a definite erotic flare to “Emeril Live.” Lagasse’s tone is sultry and suggestive. He utters his breathy, “Oh yeah, babe” catchphrase an average of three times per episode when describing a dish he plans to prepare, ingredients he plans to use, or, when tasting a dish in the making. Innuendo also finds its way into the commentary. When binding a stuffed and rolled pork tenderloin with string, he claims, “To keep all the love in one place, you’ll have to tie it up.” The studio audience quietly laughs

and he looks up from his work to give the audience and camera two separate, knowing glances. He disputes proper roasting temperatures for moist meat saying straight into the camera, “Believe me, I want to be on the wet side of things.”

Emeril the Average Joe Lagasse tells the audience that when the weather turns cold and there’s a nip in the air, “I get hungry!” He repeats the phrase twice then exclaims, “Let’s eat!” His down-to-earth demeanor and casual word choice may appeal to the studio and at-home audiences. His rhetorical tone is personal and friendly. His New England accent may be endearing to viewers. His oft-used ingredient, garlic, is pronounced “gah-lic.” Also, he is unapologetic about the fact that he frequently mispronounces words and uses incorrect grammar. For example, he adds an extra syllable to the Muscat Canelli Sabayon brand wine, calling it “Muscadat Canalli.” Phrases like “in them winter, fall salads,” and “some of you guys are askin’ why” are examples of how he remains accessible to viewers by coming across as regular and imperfect. There are no airs of superiority or upper class mentalities present.

Teacher, Performer/Host & Joker Roles

While Lagasse may be viewed as a regular guy, his popularity is possibly aided by the roles he assumes as rhetor. First he is a teacher, providing simple, how-to instruction on cooking for his viewers. As he plods along in the process, he regularly asks, “You with me so far?” After completing one step he asks, “That wasn’t so hard, was it?” He also takes on the role of a performer/host. He enters the studio wearing a blazer and then dons his uniform—a white chef’s coat—showing he is ready for action. The audience greets him with applause, cheers and handshakes. Complete with a house band, live audience and frequent guests, the show reflects nighttime talk shows like “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.” Regarding his performance, when finishing a salad of bitter greens, caramelized pears and blue cheese, he raises his arms up in the air like a rodeo calf roper, signaling, “I’m done.” In the role of joker, Lagasse’s sense of humor keeps the audience entertained. When sorting salad greens, he warns the audience to “watch out for the rubber band” that binds the stems, otherwise they might “eat a salad and floss all at the same time.” When preparing a dish of savory, sautéed pears seasoned with salt and pepper, he kids, “Try a little pepper on your pears. Say that seven times fast.”

Love is all we need

Another fantasy theme focuses on expressions of love, acceptance and happiness. Lagasse frequently employs the word “love” in a variety of ways. “Food of love” and “happy, happy” are common “Emerilisms” that appear at least once each show. When infusing dried cherries in a pan of hot wine he explains, “I heated it up because we really want to suck the love out of those fruits like that.” He reciprocates positive feelings toward the audience at the start of each show by shaking hands with at least 18 people and then stretching his arms out as if to say, “Thank you, I am grateful for your praise.” The word love is also used in situations where Lagasse might otherwise simply say likes something, as he claims to “love” whatever ingredient or dish he is describing. “I love the hearty flavors of pork tenderloin!” he exclaims.

3. Conclusions

One can look to cable’s Food Network and its star talent, chef Emeril Lagasse, for possible explanations for the nation’s burgeoning interest in the culinary world. Lagasse is the proverbial poster boy for the network and his primetime show, “Emeril Live,” is the network’s bread and butter. In this research, rhetorical criticism using fantasy theme analysis indicates that four general themes may facilitate the show’s viewership and appeal. Explicated themes include: eroticism and innuendo; Emeril as the average person; Emeril’s persona roles of teacher, performer/host and joker; and love, acceptance and happiness.

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5. References

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